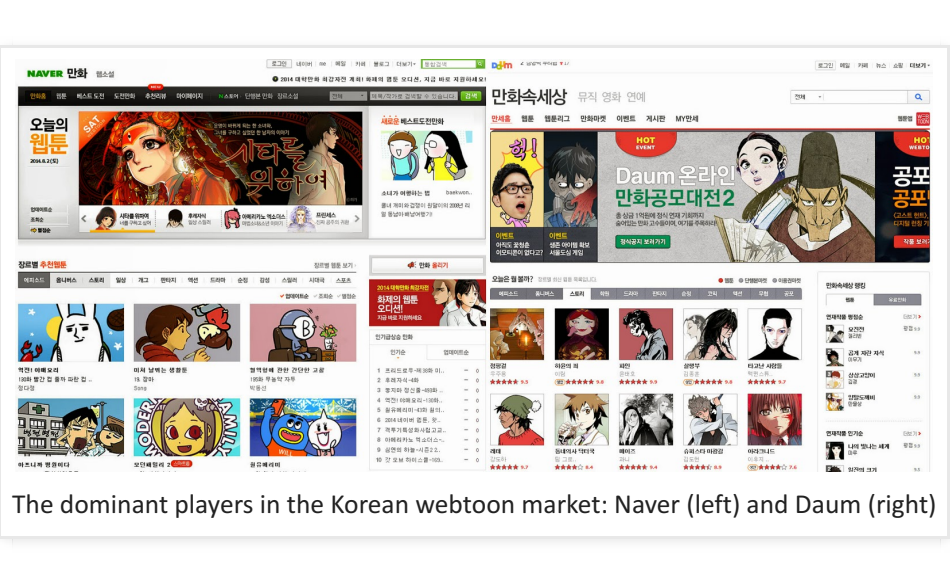
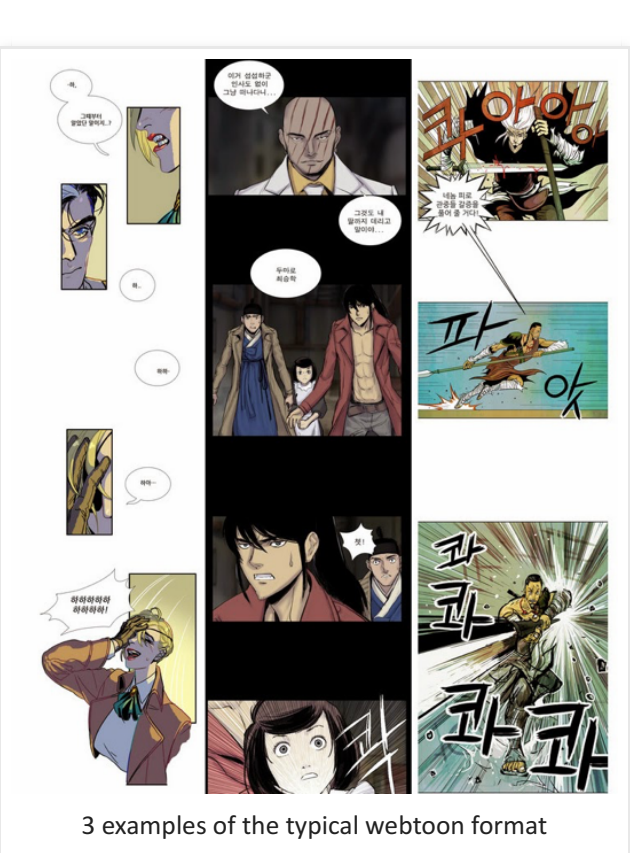
2 August 2014

# Some Thoughts About Webtoons and Panelling



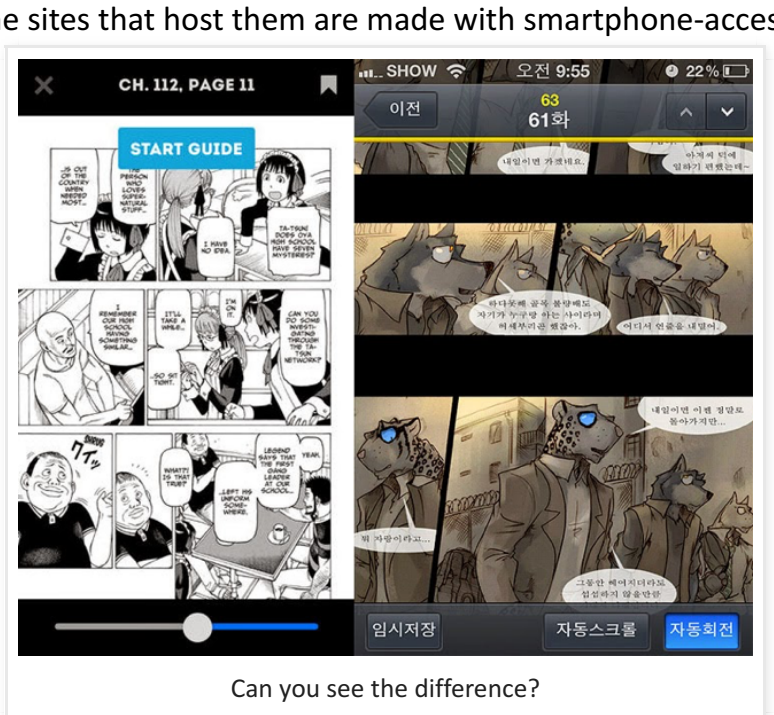
The dominant players in the Korean webtoon market: Naver (left) and Daum (right)

This time for my Some Thoughts series, I'll take a break a from the usual post about a specific work or author and instead talk generally about a medium known as webtoons, or as I like to call them, "mobile comics." For those of you who've never heard of webtoons, they're basically Korean webcomics. The language barrier has kept much of it closed off from Westerners, like how manga used to be back in the 80s, but I've noted they've begun to gain some fans overseas through fan-translations of works like Tower of God, Noblesse, or Annarasumanara. Now, you might be thinking, "Well, that's hardly a distinct medium. It's just the term Koreans use for webcomics, which itself is a sub-medium of comics." And yes, that is true, but there's an aspect in this "sub-medium" that makes them distinct to most Western webcomics, which I've already alluded to in my first sentence.



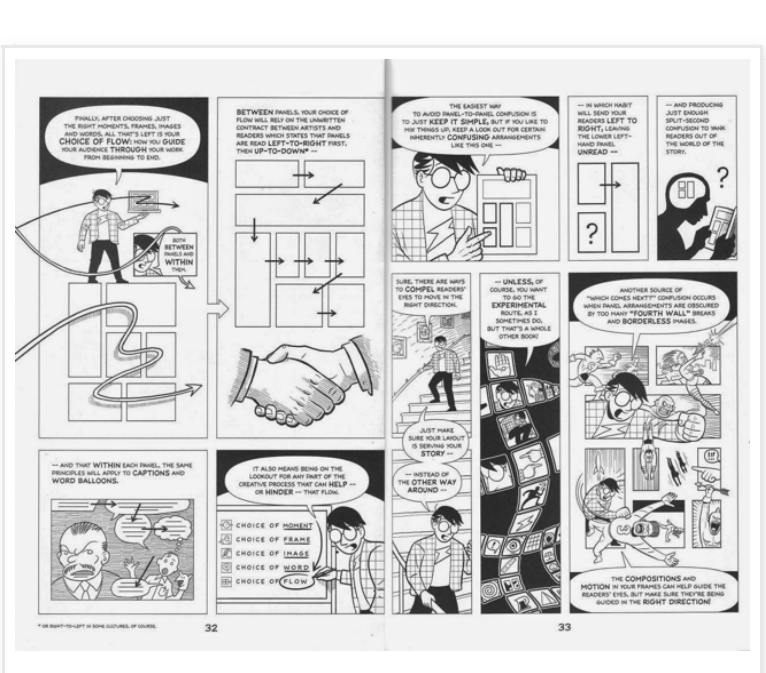
3 examples of the typical webtoon format

I've seen people online wonder why Korean comics have ridiculously long vertical strips. Clearly, they were reading it from the comfort of their PC because it'd be instantly obvious if they were using a smartphone. Webtoons are *entirely* geared towards reading on the go via smartphones. Yes, you can access batoto on your iphone or read *hark a vagrant* on your samsung galaxy. That doesn't make them mobile comics. They're just comics you can read from the internet. On the other hand, the very structure of webtoons and the sites that host them are made with smartphone-accessibility in mind.



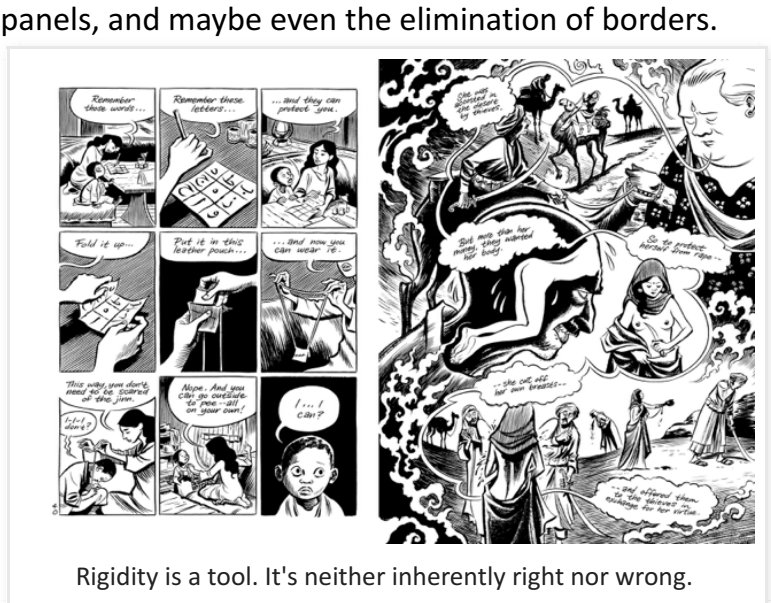
Can you see the difference?

There's very few horizontal panel flow and small panels in webtoons that require your thumb or fingers to do any more work than necessary. The panel sizes and spaces between them are intentionally formatted so that each "page" consists of only 1 or 2 rows of panels. By that, I mean that your phone's touchscreen gives a nice full view of 1-2 rows of panels at once before you have to scroll down, so that there'll never be a small panel with a dialogue that requires you to zoom in and out. Traditional print-published comics (West or East), on the other hand, use 3-4 rows of panels for each page as the standard. The entire webtoon format is designed to be so accessible that all you have to do is scroll down, which even the most technologically-impaired can do. Of course, webtoons were never designed from the ground-up to be read on smartphones, since touchscreen smartphones didn't exist in the first half of the 00s, which is the early period of webtoons (*apparently*, the vertical format was adopted mainly because of the difficulties in reading traditional comic-book format stories in the low-res CRT monitors widely used at the time). But that doesn't really make my assertion any less true, since webtoon readership underwent enormous growth from '08/'09, the same time that more and more Koreans began using touchscreen smartphones. I'm not going to talk more about webtoon history, its future, or its popular works and artists. That's not my intention. I'm writing this post to comment on the implications to the overall quality of a comic by the current webtoon model and format adopted by Korean sites like Naver and Daum.



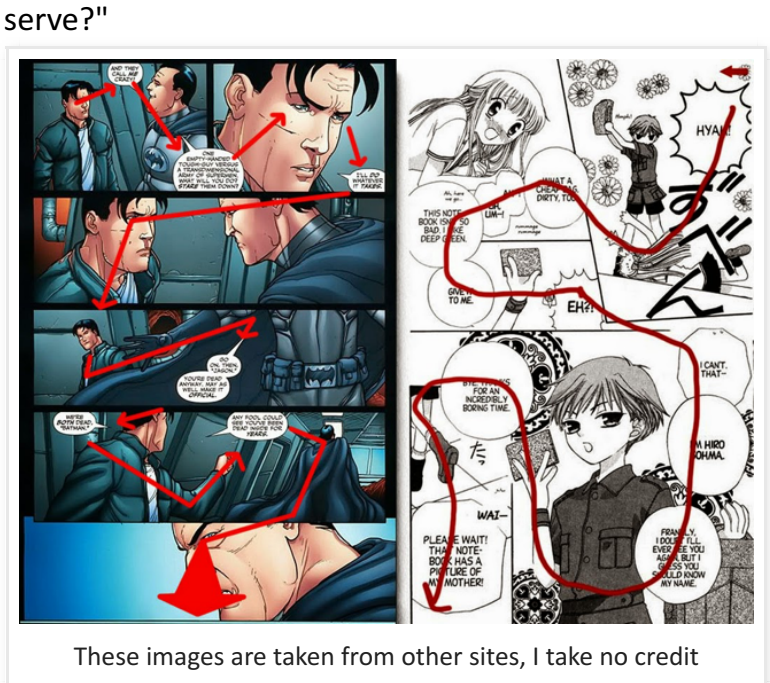
McCloud's brief intro on panelling

Panelling is probably the most overlooked aspect about comics. That's both a good and bad thing. It's good because it means that the artist was skilled enough to create a natural flow that passed unnoticed by readers. But it's also bad because it greatly diminishes one's understanding of comics, making it easy to dismiss it as an artistic medium worthy of critical scrutiny. In the early days of comics, nice orderly grids (whether 4, 6, or 9 panels) were preferred for their clarity and simplicity but like any convention, it was challenged by new generations. These youngsters sought bold angles, non-rectangular panels, and maybe even the elimination of borders.



Rigidity is a tool. It's neither inherently right nor wrong.

However, in their eagerness for dynamism and experimentation, some moved the pendulum too far to the other side, leaving clarity muddled. Fortunately, as with most trends, the pendulum gradually re-calibrated itself to a new middle-point and there's now a healthy mix of strictly ordered and loose free-flowing panelling in modern-day comics. Still, an important question to keep in mind which arose during this whole debate about which panelling style is best is, "What should panels do for comics? What purpose do they serve?"



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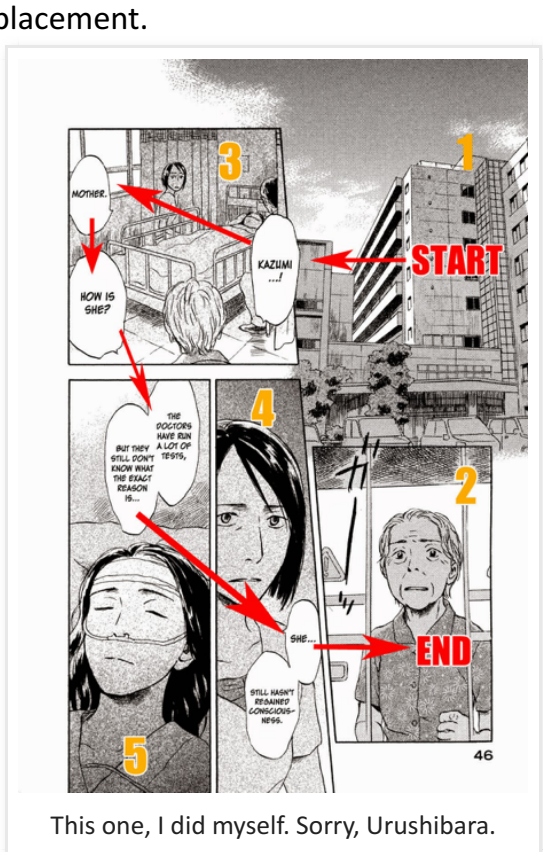
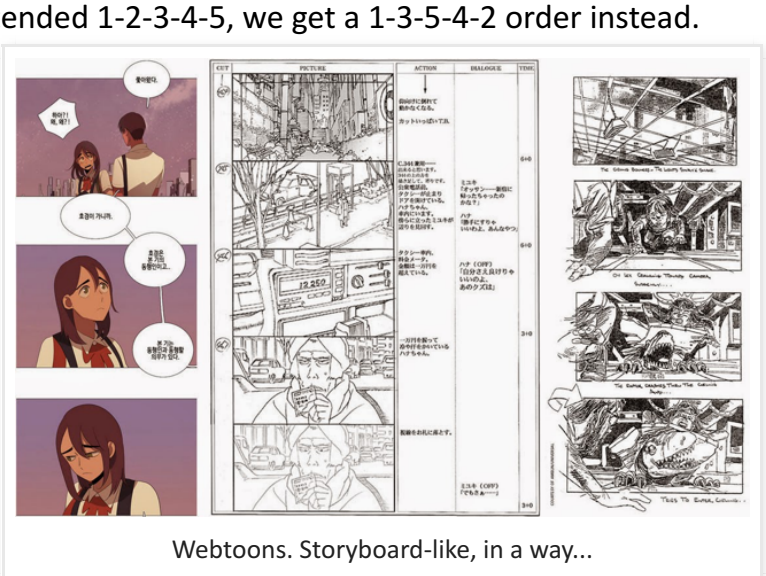
As I've already pointed out, flow is a key function. Panels are like paragraphs in writing. They help break up the mass of info in ordered parts so that your eye can have an easier time processing it sequentially. Western comics which flow from the top-left to the bottom-right corner need to take care that the eye isn't lost if and when their panels transition from right-to-left and down-to-up, the two directions that go against the general flow or "grain," if you will, of the page. For manga, these two directions would be left-to-right and down-to-up. The two images above accomplish this by having the panels work in conjunction with scene composition (mainly body gestures/eye direction in this case) and bubble placement.



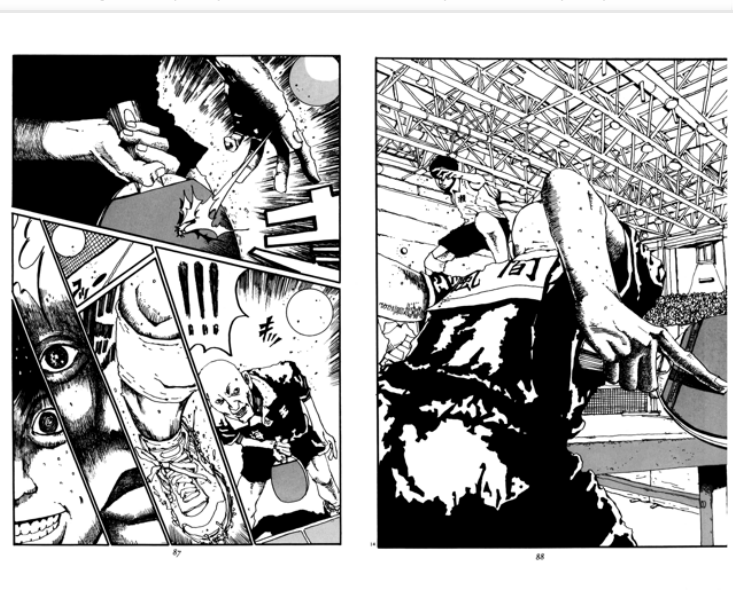
This one, I did myself. Sorry, Urushibara.

This is harder said than done. Even skilled artists can screw this up if they don't plan ahead, like the example here in Urushibara's *Waters*. The numbers in orange denote the intended panel order while the red arrows denote the most likely path your eyes will take (well, that's what happened to me, at least). The problem starts off with the word bubble in panel 3 which juts out past the borders (why, Urushibara? this bubble's got no business crossing borders!). This, combined with the fact that the grandma's face in panel 2 is placed too low, draws the eye from panel 1 to 3. The other main problem is the close placing of the bubbles in panel 3 and 5 cause the eye to skip over panel 4. So instead of the intended 1-2-3-4-5, we get a 1-3-5-4-2 order instead.



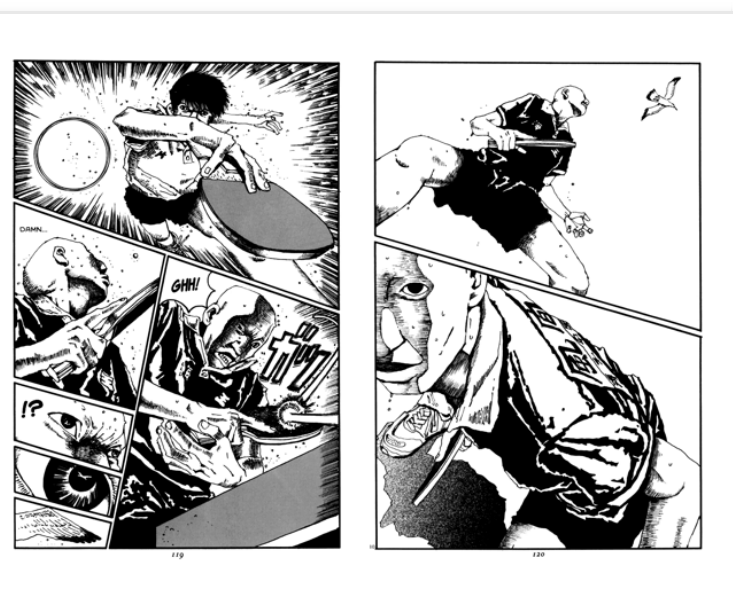
Webtoons. Storyboard-like, in a way...

Now let's return to webtoons. [sarcasm]*Gee, I wonder if flow problems exist in webtoons...?* [/sarcasm] Webtoons, if you don't know, are drawn by eager amateurs (only the most successful would have a chance in getting a deal with publishing companies and turning pro). While the artists' inexperience might cause them to slip up if they were confined to a more traditional layout, the vertical format of webtoons are so simplistic you'd have to be a genius deconstructionist to fuck it up. They're like newspaper comic strips or 4-koma manga. So if flow and simplicity are key to panelling, then webtoons reign at the top of the comics pyramid, right? No. Frankly, webtoon panelling disgusts me. Well, maybe that's a little harsh, but they do strike me as just so very, very bland. "*B-b-but why? They're just like my ultra cinematic movie storyboards!*" ...so says the theoretical webtoon defender in my head. Ah yes, the appeal to an already critically accepted medium. That's turning out just swell for modern-day video-games, with their press-X-to-see-gameplay-vanish-before-your-very-eyes!



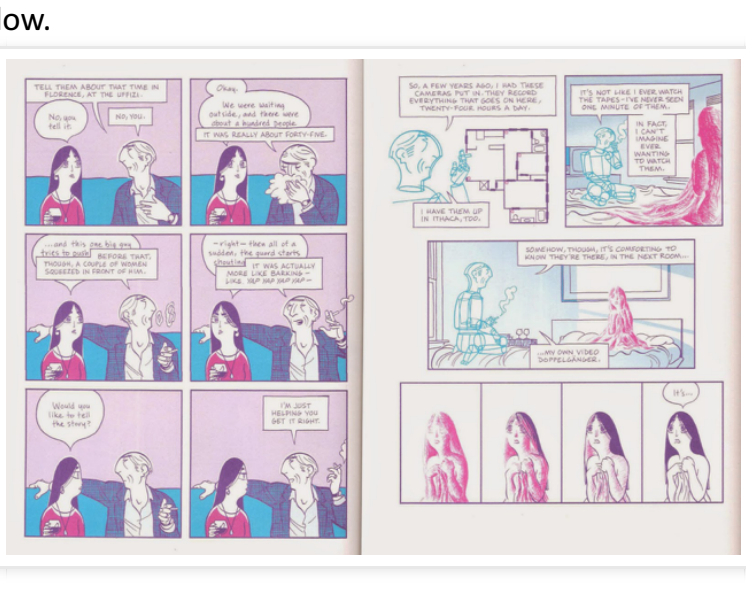
Ping Pong v5 p87-88: Peco vs. Kazama

There's a reason why movies are better enjoyed as well, movies, instead of as storyboards. In motion, timing dramatically impacts the storytelling. While you don't see it on the Jurassic Park storyboard above, it's standard practice to put in the timing for scenes in an animation storyboard. The 6+0 you see in the Tokyo Godfathers storyboard above denotes 6 seconds+0 frames out of 24. A useful tool for anime directors, but not something a comic artist can use. Can you seriously imagine reading a note by each manga panel telling you how many seconds you should spend looking at it? That's why if a comic artist is to impart some sense of timing on his readers, he has to do it entirely through panelling, specifically in the panel sizes and spaces between them. Take a look at the example from Ping Pong above. In p87 (left), Matsumoto Taiyou breaks down the match into smaller and smaller panels so as to lead your eyes quicker and quicker but just as you flip the page to p88 (right), you're greeted by one giant panel. Since your eyes naturally spend a longer time looking at bigger panels than smaller ones, the transition to the entire page-sized panel suddenly slows down your eyes from speeding through, hopefully giving the "slowed-down time" effect of Peco flying. A similar example can be seen below.

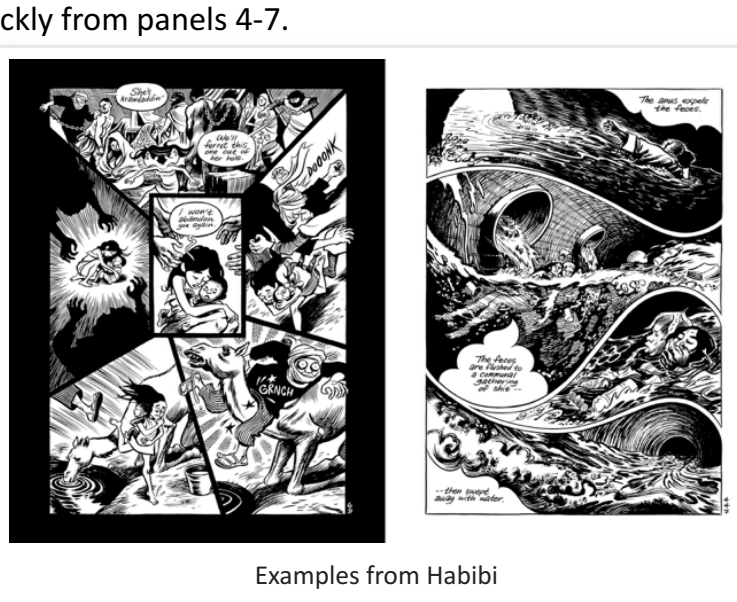


Ping Pong v5 p119-120

Panel sizes aren't the only thing that matter for timing. Take a look at this example from Asterios Polyp below.

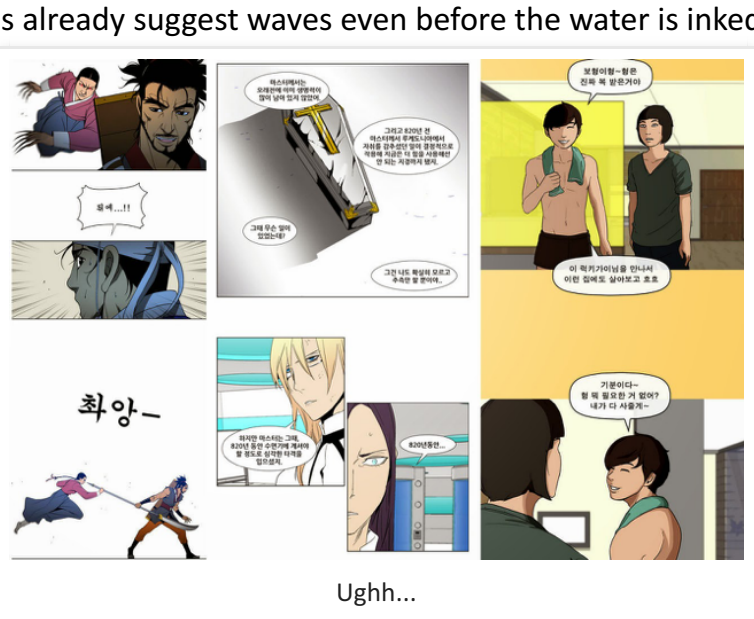


The page on the left has a strict grid layout with both panels and the spaces between panels being uniformly sized. With no space on the page larger or smaller than the other, the reader is likely to spend an equal amount of time on each panel (I'm ignoring the length of dialogue since it's a little outside the scope of my post). Meanwhile, the page on the right minimizes the space between panels for the bottom row, using only thin purple lines. Hence, the eye might linger or do a quick look-back to the previous panel when traversing the larger white barrier between panel 3 and 4, but it will flow smoothly and quickly from panels 4-7.



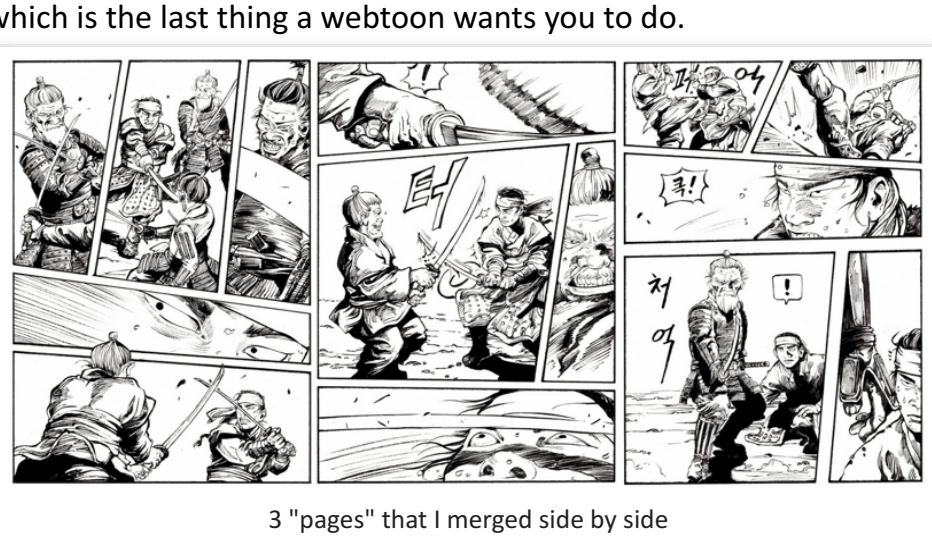
Examples from Habibi

Lastly, panels by themselves can impart meaning, even before they're filled up with art. In the left page above, the central rectangle surrounded by other panels establishes its commanding importance, which is perfect for depicting a scene in which the protagonist's central struggle is to save an abandoned baby. Meanwhile on the right, the panels themselves already suggest waves even before the water is inked in.



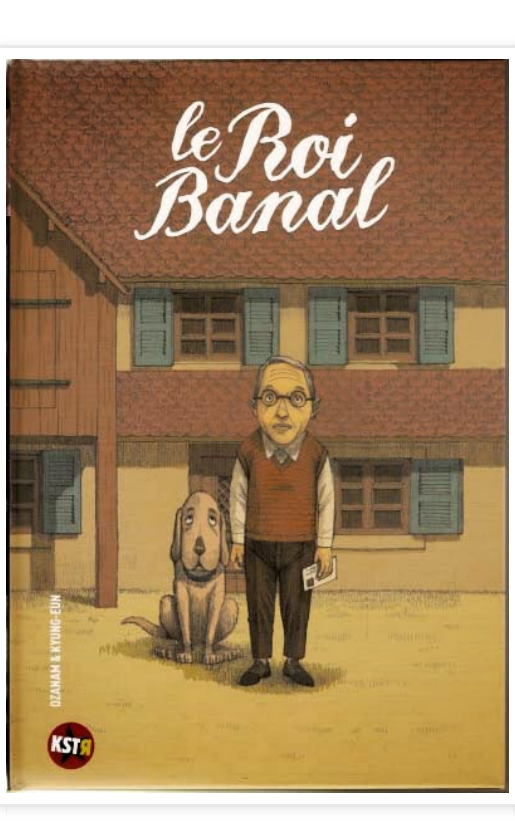
Ughh...

Alright, having said all that, I hope you can now understand why I dislike the overuse of uniform "cinematic" rectangular panels and gratuitous use of spaces between them that webtoons seem to promote. But I'm being a little too harsh here. There's nothing set in stone that a webtoon artist *has* to draw in these bland ways. The only thing I feel that the webtoon format wholly eliminates is the double-page spread (Annarasumanara baaaaadly needed it). Yes, it is possible to just turn a phone sideways, but the result still looks way too cramped (not everyone uses a tablet), forcing you to zoom in/out if there's dialogue, which is the last thing a webtoon wants you to do.



3 "pages" that I merged side by side

In any case, you can still find a few webtoon artists who're working with the traditional page format. There's also other artists who really try to make full use of the web in webtoon by implementing javascript triggers to insert animated sequences, background music, and other things normally impossible on a piece of paper. People complain that there's too few genuinely scary comics, so it's nice when something like Bongchon-Dong Ghost comes along to scare the bejesus out of even seasoned internet veterans. Also, aggregating eager comic artists in one site to help them reach a wider audience is a pretty good idea in and of itself, something that France seems to have picked up by setting up the site Delitoon, which claims inspiration from the Korean webtoon model. I just hope more of their artists pay attention to what creative panelling can do for their comics.



P.S. If you can read French, Le Roi Banal's a nice short read on Delitoon.

Labels: Some Thoughts About Manga

## 21 comments:

**Doomroar** 2 August 2014 at 18:45

I agree with all of it, and now i will go and browse delitoon.

Reply

**laika** 2 August 2014 at 18:49

You can include some of the stuff that was in "digital graphic novels," which kept in mind the devices that the medium was gonna play itself out on (and limitations/freedoms of it,) as something to consider/look at. I recall there being "digital" comics created by Marvel at around the same time (or prior) where they were incorporating things like dynamic zoom into panels or other such effects. The experience is really different, though hard to say if it's not too much of a mishmash/derivative of two different things, or more like something new.

For some of the new web magazines that they've been coming up for Japanese comics on the web they've even included youtube videos in their lineups of what basically amount to manzai + kamishibai. Not anything particularly new, but in the context of what would go into something modeled after existing comic magazine, it's sort of interesting.

Whether or not webtoons incorporate more of the things that they can do exclusively by taking advantage of the platform the medium is delivered on almost doesn't matter to me because unless the mobile platform changes in some radical way, i don't feel like it's ever gonna get past some of the hurdles set by its physical limitations. You're still gonna have to deal with a "mobile" x by y inch screen no matter the resolution you have, and no matter all the digital bells and whistles you can put in there. Sure, that might not matter to anyone who really believes that the medium is disposable, but to anyone who thinks differently, it's probably incredibly frustrating -> cue the David Lynch clip where he complains about the iphone.

Reply

**Anonymous** 2 August 2014 at 19:13

I really liked Annarasumanara. I didn't think it need two page spreads at least when I read it, but reading it again would probably point it out. I think it did well for the format. But yeah, most webtoons are a catastrophe of paneling and all that white space.

Also Naver has started doing official translations if you didn't know.

http://m.webtoons.com/

Designed for mobile, which is a right royal pain. On desktop it blows up the image to your screen width. It also serves 70% jpeg when there's 90% jpeg with some basic url manipulation. It's practically unreadable on desktop.

I even wrote a pretty non-robust fix for it: https://greasyfork.org/scripts/3785-naver-webtoon-viewer-fix

But that's pretty damn ridiculous.

Reply

Replies

> **Hox** 2 August 2014 at 21:31
>
> Yeah, what naver's trying to do with its emerging western readership is a joke with their poor scans and translations.
>
> **Tempest13** 29 January 2015 at 05:15
>
> Yeah the site's organization is nice but trying to read it on my computer was a chore, at least I do have something to read on my mobile now though because manga reader apps do not have these webtoons in proper format and trying to read like that is well....impossible.
>
> Paneling is so important in this medium, the first one I stumbled upon I dropped immediately because it was damn near nauseating, but since then I found plenty that made creative use of the vertical format and have become a fan of the amateur heavy sub-medium. Good article.
>
> Reply

**jrdp_18** 4 August 2014 at 22:41

Thank you! It was a nice, informative read.

Reply

**Anonymous** 5 August 2014 at 23:19

Thanks for the thoughtful post, as always.

I'd go a little further and say that paneling is the language of the medium, though, rather than just the paragraphs/structure. It's the halfway point between prose and direction.

Reply

**Anonymous** 8 August 2014 at 01:09

Probably not the right place to ask, but do you have any recommendations for any Western graphic novels that are in English?

Reply

Replies

> **Hox** 8 August 2014 at 02:26
>
> I'm trying to become more well-read on western comics myself too, but sure I can recommend you some. Here's 4 that I've read and enjoyed this year alone.
>
> Three Shadows by Cyril Pedrosa
> Pinocchio by Winshluss
> Stitches by David Small
> Habibi by Craig Thompson
>
> I think I'll put up a more comprehensive 50 recs list like my manga one, once I've read more. But for the time being, just search up the Eisner or Angouleme comics-award winners and see if they have English translations or not. They're all usually solid reads.
>
> Reply

**Anonymous** 10 August 2014 at 20:31

holy crap. i read that horror strip. thanks!

Reply

**Anonymous** 11 August 2014 at 03:24

Excellent post.

Given the general topic of showing people things properly, does anyone else read the manhwa Blood and Steel? And if so, are you irritated by the author's seemingly incessant need to explain every. single. goddamn. thing.
It's like he/she's incapable of shutting up and letting the drawings and panel flow speak for themselves.

Reply

**Anonymous** 18 August 2014 at 20:56

There's something supremely addictive about sliding through an entire installment, even if the content isn't as great as it could be.

Reply

**Anonymous** 2 September 2014 at 09:54

I agree with pretty much everything. But i don't think we should be too harsh on webtoons just yet. I think they could look a lot better if skilled artists just tried. Remember, the format was born not too long ago. Manga also used to look more simple when it started out.

Spread pages were also the first thought that sprung into my mind when i considered the topic. In general, they are lacking the ability to vary columns as much as manga can. It's like they are lacking one dimension compared to manga.
But that being said, i think webtoons may have their own strengths. I'm sure some creative will show them to us eventually.
So yeah, webtoons are terribly crude right now, but maybe they will become more sophisticated as time goes on. or not.

Reply

Replies

> **Hox** 2 September 2014 at 10:39
>
> Yeah, they're mostly just amateurs giving the whole comic thing a shot, so I do appreciate the passion that they're showing whether or not I enjoy their work. I just hope that for the few who go pro will set their sights higher by weening off the typical template and think about what playing around with panelling can do for their work.
>
> Reply

**OniluapL** 2 September 2014 at 11:04

While I agree with most of your post, I want to add that webtoons have the possibility (and some already did it) of using this blank space for benefit of the story. I mean, you have the possibility to single out panels, to make they far apart... I agree they should try to go beyond the simple "cinematic storyboard", but the medium has some good unique points with relation to the space they can use (which is more limited physically) that may be a good diferential.

Reply

**Khalid** 6 May 2015 at 13:56

Your article is EXACTLY what I had in mind but was struggling to put into words. Very insightful article.

Reply

**Anonymous** 28 February 2016 at 21:54

I used to hate webtoon because when the 1st line webtoon appear , thr story just so cliche . But after sometime , i realize what i hate is not the webtoon ( because is like publishing manga through digital and colorized ) but the paneling style of webtoon . There some webtoon i like , but i enjoy better when there is formatted like paginated or manga panel style . Rather always scrolling down ........... i more enjoy like side scrolling for example ( up and down ) or drama webtoon orange marmalade in physical print book ( i think the page is being fitted more like manga )

Reply

**Anonymous** 20 July 2016 at 18:45

I would rather read a comic that scrolls horizontally on a phone. How often do you look up and down irl? Interesting things are side by side and you can't have big backgrounds like this, unless they're trees and tall people -draw two people side by side and someone will likely be cut out. So they draw them standing right next to each other which makes every character seem intimately close even when they're not supposed to be.

Of course, they draw the feet which you want to see rather than the atmosphere of where they are. Then when you finish reading a panel that fills the whole screen (and usually more) there is an awkward moment when you're dragging to the next panel, reorienting yourself, and looking at the sky or something while you try to find where the text is. That's something you'd know at first a glance traditionally.

It's retarded and the main reason I can't read most modern Korean comics. The second being that their stories are usually 70's-"safe", are nothing you haven't read before, and generally suck. Even "tower of god" (their most popular one) is just another shounen that I had to hang up when it promised climbing a skyscraper with exciting battles to the death on each floor. Yawn. It's like they haven't moved on from Bruce Lee movies. Koreans still have undeveloped taste in manga plot lines

Reply

**Anonymous** 17 January 2020 at 17:47

Bruh. 2019 seeing webtoons boom. I personally dont see it stopping. Younger readers might like the conviency of webtoon platforms and the fact their colored. I personally like learning about webtoons been reading a lot of the articles, seems like a lot of the information is outdated though. Sucks. Cause I wanted to learn about gutters and how they can be used to convey emotion. I think the really good webtoons or at least my favorite are really good at with invisible design of paneling and gutter and coloring. Just saying as someone fron 2019.

Reply

Replies

> **Anonymous** 17 January 2020 at 17:48
>
> Although they really found the niches. Like most are copycats of each other. My favorites are who made me a princess, this girl is wild, master of ghu, mages and demons, and personally any story where someone gets iseskid lol.
>
> **Anonymous** 17 January 2020 at 17:49
>
> Sorry meant 2020. Im dumb.
>
> Reply

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